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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ACCRA 002182

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SUBJECT: GHANA ELECTION SEASON UPDATE: ONE MONTH TO GO

SUMMARY

1. (C) A month before Ghana's December 7 presidential and parliamentary elections, the campaign is heating up but the political atmosphere is generally peaceful. The ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP) appears to have the edge over its three party rivals. Poor turnout during the public exhibition of the voter register and errors found among those who did show up may raise some questions about the legitimacy of the registration. Nonetheless, the Electoral Commission is confident it can correct errors on the register. Most local analysts see little potential for polling day rigging and believe the conditions are in place for a free and fair election. The election is likely to be peaceful, although chieftancy and other disputes could lead to minor election-related violence. The volatile Northern Region is quiet at the moment, following an isolated incident of violence in early October. End summary.

NPP Likely to Win

2. (U) Four presidential candidates officially filed their nominations with the Electoral Commission (EC) between October 20-22. The candidates and their running mates are: President John Kufuor and Alhaji Aliu Mahama for the New Patriotic Party (NPP), John Atta-Mills and Alhaji Mohammed Mumuni for the National Democratic Congress, Dr. Edward Mahama and Mr. Dan Ofori-Atta of the People's National Convention, representing the Grand Coalition (which comprises three small parties, including the PNC), and Mr. George Aguddey and Mr. Bright Kwame Ameyaw.

3. (C) Political analysts here increasingly expect a solid NPP victory in both the presidential and parliamentary races. While the NDC still has a hold on some traditional strongholds, it is hampered by the convalescence of its vice presidential candidate (still recovering from a car accident) and by financial difficulties. It is not clear that the prominence of former President J.J. Rawlings in the campaign is helping the NDC. One journalist contact highlighted Rawlings' continued charisma and draw, but other analysts see Rawlings as a liability overall, reminding voters of the human rights abuses and authoritarian legacy of his years in power. Senior NDC politician Hannah Tetteh Kpodar told PolOff on November 3 that "it would be a miracle if NDC stumbles into victory." She also said that the NDC would likely lose two seats in Parliament that it currently holds.

4. (C) Academic and NGO political contacts agree that, while the economic situation of the average Ghanaian has not improved markedly, most voters seem willing to give the NPP another four years to deliver. The NPP reportedly has been more active than the NDC in using its wealth and incumbency to buy food, bicycles and other items for voters. High cocoa prices and yields should also benefit the NPP. While the NPP is expected to do well, a recent study by the Center for Democracy and Development supported other sources in noting that the NPP has suffered more than other parties from intra-party conflict and corruption in the parliamentary primaries.

The Electoral Commission Still Stumbling

5. (SBU) Since the Electoral Commission (EC) began its nationwide voter registration exercise in March 2004, its efforts to create a 'clean' voter register have been hampered by resource and organizational problems. The EC's recent public exhibition of the register was disappointing. According to local press reports, turnout to examine names on the register was low; some centers recorded only 50 to 60 percent of voters coming to verify the accuracy of their names and registration details. A number of those who examined their records found errors. According to a journalist contact, ten percent of those who came to check the roster in Western region found errors.

6. (U) Representatives from all the political parties have called on the EC to hold a second, final exhibition of the register. Representatives of the EC told PolOff on November 3

that it will not do so (and they have stated this publicly), but will instead mobilize its efforts to answer the challenges raised in the first exhibition. EC officials told PolOffs they are confident they will rectify all problems and consider any legitimate challenges to the register before the election. They acknowledge they are pressed for time, but will begin printing ballots next week and tell us they do not anticipate a delay in preparations for the election.

Isolated Concerns about Election Violence

17. (C) Political contacts expect a generally peaceful election, especially given the repeated pleas for peace by all political parties. Nonetheless, there is the potential for local chieftancy disputes, personality clashes, commercial rivalries and other local issues to result in localized incidents of violence. The Western Regional Police Commander recently told PolChief that he is worried about such election-related violence and the inadequacy of his small police force to respond.

18. (SBU) The Northern Region remains volatile, with large quantities of small arms in the area and simmering ethnic tensions. An unresolved chieftancy dispute that led to the murder of the Ya-Na in 2002 (a case which is still under investigation), as well as a two-year state of emergency that was only lifted in August, lends added tension to the Dagbon and Tamale areas. On October 3, a 14-year-old boy (an alleged NDC supporter) was fatally shot during a clash between NPP and NDC party supporters in the area. There are many rumors and few facts about this case. After the shooting, police raided the suspect's home and found in his freezer an AK47 which matches the type of bullet that killed the boy. The suspect, Baba Nkarbo (a well-known NPP activist), and an alleged accomplice, Nuhu Nkarbo, are currently in police custody while investigations continue. Observers agree that there is the potential for more politically-linked violence in the Northern Region in the coming month.

Comment

19. (C) With one month to go, the NPP is not taking a presidential victory for granted. Campaign rhetoric is generally civil and the political atmosphere is peaceful. The EC's problems with the register are troubling and it will have to scramble to get ready in the coming month. International donors to the EC are frustrated with its institutional weaknesses, delays and cost overruns. Despite these problems, which do not appear too major, the Ghana election seems likely to be generally peaceful and fair. End Comment.
YATES